

# Listen

*A Seeker's Resource for Spiritual Direction*

J U L Y 2 0 1 1

V O L 5 : I S S U E 3

## CULTIVATING COMPASSION IN COMMUNITY

I met an author who inspires me. Speaking before a crowd of several hundred, her boots, peeping out from beneath her dress hem, drew my attention. I was not alone in my wondering gaze. Hand-brushed with vivid paint strokes, her army boots gave life to poppies, sunflowers, grapes, and olives. Ibtisam Barakat is a Palestinian-American poet who captivates with words and insight, composing a place of shelter, belonging, and challenge. She tells when a "war clung to my feet, I decided to give my feet a beautiful home that is not occupied by an army. I transformed a pair of army boots to a safe place." Simple paints, a brush, and her decision create transformation and peace.

We discover fundamental parts of ourselves in and through interacting with one another in community. When we rub up against other personalities and individuals, we learn where we are fearful, gifted, cruel, expansive, dismissive, and delightful. We discover humility in community—and radical transformation. Let me explain: within every one of us is a longing for connection and belonging. Our contributions are valuable. We give, and we receive. We gather with each other to create families, places of celebration, and share grief. We unite for a common purpose, vision, and to learn from one another. The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Whatever affects one directly affects



White pelican—*Pelecanus onocrotalus*

all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of reality."

Beyond basic human necessities of water, food, clothing, and shelter, many of us experience loneliness. A genuine experience of community is an antidote to loneliness. A human baby who is not touched will die. Neglect and abandonment cause fissures in our psyche and soul, and pain or illness in our body. We are woven together inexplicably and irretrievably. Contemplative or spiritual practice illumines this reality. Similar to musicians who jam together, or perform complex compositions, we too participate with one another in sophisticated and simple interactions, creating harmony or currents of discord in our daily life.

You and I both seek connections and belonging—with our essential self, the

Sacred, our home, work, and with the circles of care where we are present, active, and involved. In healthy communities we give and receive love, speak and are never silenced, share laughter, break bread, play together, cultivate compassion, and can spill forth life for those on the margins. Healing and wholeness—our beauty—occur when we hold onto ourselves, and are vulnerable and brave enough to connect in visible and invisible manners.

Our prayer life and contemplative or spiritual practice aid our discovery of the places where we are divisive and war with inner peace and harmony. A spiritual director or guide can help us cultivate healing and forgiveness. Spiritual direction is a safe time to discern our best yes to communities and groups where our involvement becomes interdependent, beautiful, and life-giving.

—Pegge Erkeneff

### SEEDS OF INTEREST:

- Field Guide: *The Fire In The Seeker*
- Field Notes: *Agape*
- Poetry: *Guard Your Heart*
- Art: *Guard Your Heart*
- Contemplative Practice
- Global Resources
- Ask Owl

## THE FIRE IN THE SEEKER

**A** Fire burns in the core of our being that never goes out in this lifetime. It's a divine Fire that cooks our raw human ingredients with its loving, transforming heat. With our consent it will shape us into an ever more uniquely loving and creative expression of itself. Some of the early Church Elders spoke of our lives as a movement from the image of God in which we were born, to the full likeness of God for which we were made. That is an ongoing process, a permanent "stewing" in the divine cooking pot. Sometimes we are spiritually content, a sense of gentle, simmering in the living Fire. At other times the Fire is turned up. We sense something more is being shaped in us, but we don't know what it is. Our contentment is replaced by a fresh seeking for the more of God that we are mysteriously being invited to find.

Such times of new seeking can be shared with other seekers. As an example, the last few years I have been privileged to be involved with a number of Korean seekers. If you are familiar with churches in Korea, you know they are full of incredibly energetic, devoted, mission minded people. Many of them have a very fervent prayer life that can include hours of intensive praise, petition, and intercession.

One would think they would be content with the many-faceted spiritual life they already have. Yet the Fire has been turned up in recent years for some of them. They are being drawn, as they sometimes put it, to greater

depth in their own and their congregations' spiritual lives. They (along with many others around the world) have come to believe that such depth is available to them in the historical spiritual stream of contemplative understanding and practices, which many of them have only recently discovered.

That belief led to the enrollment of some Korean pastors in Shalem Institute contemplative extension programs, and through them to an invitation for me and Carole Crumley to bring further contemplative grounding to Korea through two six day retreat-workshops a year apart. The fifty participants (mostly pastors from a number of different denominations), despite their long spiritual experience, came as fresh seekers of the contemplative way. Their openness and devotion to the task was humbling to us. Their continued gatherings with one another beyond those retreats, including group spiritual direction for some of them, are forming a beachhead in Korea for introducing contemplative awareness more broadly. It is being received not as a replacement for what they have been given spiritually before, but as a deepening of it—a deeper communion with the Deep Real, the mysterious but so intimate Gracious One in whom we live and move and have our being.

The spiritual journey never ends. Contemplative tradition is very clear about that. Great mystics witness to the ongoing liberating Fire in their lives. Sometimes it warms us and we are content. Sometimes it burns hot, purging and reshaping us. Sometimes it is hidden, leaving us groping in the dark. Always it can be trusted as the ever present living Fire that, with our willingness, shapes true life in and around us.

—The Rev. Tilden Edwards, PhD, is the founder and senior fellow of the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, Washington, DC, USA. Author of several books on the spiritual life, including two on spiritual direction, he is an international retreat and workshop leader and lecturer related to contemplative spiritual life and leadership.

*Listen*

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and discover excellent questions to ask yourself and any potential spiritual directors you choose to interview. To locate a spiritual director or guide, go online to *Seek and Find: A Worldwide Resource Guide of Available Spiritual Directors*. More than 6,000 spiritual directors are listed by geographical location at **[www.sdiworld.org](http://www.sdiworld.org)**.



# FIELD NOTES

## AGAPE

**A**s spiritual directors, we are called to walk with those who have sought our guidance. In the process of sharing their journey, we so often are led into the heart of their pain and woundedness. We bear witness to their suffering, and it changes us. Compassion invites us to be with others in their pain and share their burdens, their sorrows. But sometimes we just don't know what to do with it. We want to do more than sit with them and listen to their groaning. Sometimes it just doesn't feel like enough. Perhaps the word *agape* can help us find our way through. We are all familiar with *agape* and understand it to mean God's selfless love. However, the word *agape* was in use long before it developed its religious context.

According to legend, the ancient Greeks coined the word as an antidote to their warring ways, and literally translated, it means "When you are in my territory, I will make you safe." I like this interpretation, and if you think about it, it is entirely congruent with our ideas about God's love. When we enter into the kingdom of God, which is always and everywhere around us, we are kept safe by the love of a compassionate God, a God who walks

with us in every time and place, sharing our burdens and offering comfort and hope. And this meaning gives us guidance for being a compassionate presence for our spiritual directees. It tells us that one of our primary tasks is to create a safe place. As a former psychotherapist working with abuse victims, I can tell you that nothing healing can happen until a victim feels safe. The same is true of any spiritual directee who is seeking to heal from spiritual and emotional woundedness.

In his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer describes the soul as a wild animal who is wary of revealing itself. The soul stays hidden in the safe darkness of the woods and will not emerge until it is sure it can do so without being harmed. This is our challenge and our calling—to provide such a safe place that the soul can emerge and reveal its hidden hurts, feeling confident that they will be received with gentleness, caring, and compassion. This is *agape*, and it is enough.

—Sue Magrath, MC, is a recently retired mental health counselor, now living in Leavenworth, Washington, USA, where she focuses on spiritual direction, retreat leadership, and writing. Her e-mail is sue-magrath@msn.com.

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"Guard Your Heart" —Claudia Campbell [Georgia, USA]

## Guard Your Heart

She takes the bird into her hands  
and brings it near  
to hold it in her crossed arms  
her fingers tight together  
as if it would slip away.

She hugs it to her  
as if holding could revive it  
as if she could protect it  
from every kind of harm.

She looks into the distance  
and all her energy  
sinks into the heart, beating,  
warmth to warmth, as if  
it could fly again.

—Andrew Rudd, Atlanta, Georgia, 2011  
[Cheshire, England]

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# CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

Find a place of inner expansion—take a slow inhalation, then let your breath go, completely. Breathe in again, fully expanding your lungs and belly, let go. Continue several times.

With deliberation and intention, read this text aloud:

*"It is when we are the most broken that we become the most loving. When we are stripped of all we pretend to know; when our masks are torn from our faces; when our stories are ripped from our grasp; when the self*

*we imagine ourselves to be is shattered; and when we are left with nothing to hold on to and nothing to hide behind; then we find the searing love of the Divine burning through us, melting the wax of ego, consuming the wick of self, and using the hope and horror of our lives to illumine the world."* – Rabbi Rami Shapiro [Tennessee, USA]

Pause. Become aware of any *sensation* in your body. Simply notice. Place your hands where you experience sensation.

Again, read the text ...

Pause. Allow any *feelings* to rise in you. Acknowledge emotions without judgment. Breathe deeply.

Again, read the text ...

Take a breath, then ask yourself, "*What word, phrase, or image comes to mind?*" Place your hands over your heart. Pause.

Again, read the text ...

Invite your body to move into sensation. You may choose stillness, you might stand, or dance, clench and unclench your hands, move your arms, legs, belly, pelvis, shoulders, neck, hips, knees, toes. Give yourself permission to find a rhythm, and stay with it for several minutes.

Read the text one last time ...

Conclude by offering thanksgiving for whatever transpired, in a way that is appropriate for you. Perhaps with a word or phrase, a deep cleansing breath, movement, gesture, or sound. What is revealed to you? Is there something you will carry forward in your awareness for the next several hours?

## GLOBAL RESOURCES : Supporting Your Spiritual Journey

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# ASK OWL



**Q**uestion: I'm interested in spiritual direction with a group. Can you describe the difference between meeting with a group in contrast to one-on-one spiritual guidance?

**H**oot Hoot: Group spiritual direction is a powerful alternative to individual, one-on-one spiritual guidance. A healthy group will make a commitment to compassionate listening on behalf of one another; confidentiality and respect; and vulnerability to share one's own story in the context of the shared time.

Generally, a group of between four and six people committed to listening for the presence of God in the lives of each person in the group meets monthly, for approximately two hours. A group could be facilitated by a spiritual director who does not participate with personal disclosure, or by a spiritual guide who is fully involved in the process in the same way as everyone who is present. A group process might include a rhythm of shared silence, presentation by a person, reflection, response centered in noticing how God is revealed in the story, and shared silence. This rhythm would be repeated

for everyone present. Alternately, a group might choose a common text or a creative process in order to evoke personal reflection and responses.

Several benefits to group spiritual direction are often overlooked. Group spiritual direction can be helpful in locales where there are very few spiritual directors. Group spiritual direction cultivates compassion in community—we hear sacred life stories from each other and realize we are not alone in our feelings and experience of living. Intergenerational groups can be especially life-giving. Group spiritual direction helps us become less self-centered. Spiritual guidance is never a time for direct problem solving, and this is specifically true in group spiritual direction. Safety and confidentiality is crucial, and no one should ever feel judged. Thus, a good spiritual director, or mature commitment is necessary.

Group spiritual direction is a time for connection, community, and developing the contemplative qualities of listening, receptivity, and being present. Tip: type “group spiritual direction” into the search box at [www.sdiworld.org](http://www.sdiworld.org)

—If you have a question for Owl, please e-mail [Listen@sdiworld.org](mailto:Listen@sdiworld.org).

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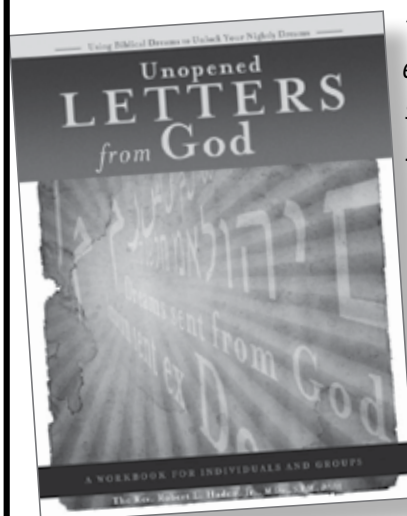
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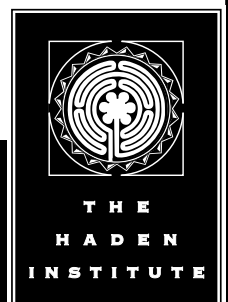


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